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SUBJECT: UNPOPULAR TASMANIAN PREMIER RESIGNS, SURPRISING COLLEAGUES
AND PUBLIC ALIKE

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Tasmania's beleaguered Premier Paul Lennon resigned suddenly May 26 in favor of his deputy, David Bartlett. Dogged by allegations of corruption over his four years as premier, the abrasive Lennon claimed he left on his terms believing it was time for a generational change. Particularly damaging to Lennon was his unswerving defense of the proposed environmentally and financially dubious Gunns pulp mill, whose approval he fast-tracked through parliament. The young and urbane Bartlett, who is an information technology (IT) expert, announced immediately that the project would stand or fall on whether Gunns achieved other necessary approvals and finance. The new premier has until May 2010 to turn around the Labor Party's fortunes in Tasmania. END SUMMARY.

LENNON FALLS ON HIS SWORD

¶12. (SBU) Dogged by the whiff of scandal aggravated by his abrasive, non-inclusive management style, Tasmanian Premier Paul Anthony Lennon resigned suddenly on May 26, surprising colleagues and the public alike. The 52-year-old Lennon (born October 8, 1955), whose popularity numbers trailed behind those of his party, claimed that he was leaving on his terms, believing it was time for a generational change. Although the premier's name had been associated with a number of shady dealings in the course of his four-year administration, his unpopular fast-tracking of the proposed Gunns pulp mill in the north of the state was a significant factor in his undoing. Lennon's insistence on the project, despite environmental concerns and doubts over its financial viability, led to a media campaign spotlighting probity in government.

A NEW GENERATION TAKES OVER

¶13. (SBU) Succeeding Lennon is his 40-year-old Deputy Premier, David John Bartlett (born January 19, 1968). One of his first acts was to appoint 35-year-old Larissa "Lara" Tahireh Giddings (born November 14, 1972) as Deputy Premier. Unaligned within the Tasmanian Labor Party, Bartlett selected a political ally of Lennon's from the Party's minority Right Faction to be his number two. Both individuals are International Visitor Program grantees. They will retain their demanding portfolios of education and health, respectively.

WASTING NO TIME BURYING MISTAKES OF THE PAST

¶14. (SBU) Tasmania's new premier has until May 22, 2010 to hold an election and restore faith in government accountability after the scandals that marked the Lennon years. In the press conference announcing his assuming charge, Bartlett did not rule out replacing key staff within his cabinet, but made no immediate changes to Lennon's team because the state budget is due this week. There is some speculation that the new premier will reshuffle his cabinet in

early 2009.

¶15. (SBU) Bartlett also pledged to take a "deeply considered approach based on data, information and knowledge" on forest policy and old-growth logging, an issue that raised the hackles of the state's powerful Green Party. He also reaffirmed the Tasmanian Government's commitment to consider establishing an ethics commission. Later, in an interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Lateline program, Bartlett distanced himself from Lennon, noting that the Gunns pulp mill would have to survive on its own merits, with the proponent and financiers deciding its future. He said he had never met Gunns executive chairman John Gay, with whom Lennon was reportedly closely associated.

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) An old-school labor leader and union organizer, Lennon allegedly played fast and loose with ethics and had a seeming blind spot to the appearance of impropriety. Some observers attribute this character flaw to his humble origins and wish for acceptance by "the high end of town." One analyst quipped to us that it was a widespread perception in Tasmania that, "the fastest way to get a 'yes' out of Paul was to take him out on your yacht and show him a good time." When elected Premier, Bartlett had only been Deputy Premier for six weeks and in parliament four years. His two Deputy Premier predecessors, Brian Green and Steve Kons, resigned from office with clouds of corruption hanging over their heads. Thus, "the last man standing" was how one observer described Bartlett, whose record in the education portfolio was one of "change for change's sake." While not handed the most auspicious beginning, the urbane Bartlett, who has an IT background, has time and intelligence on his side to turn around Labor's fortunes in Tasmania.

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¶17. (U) This message was cleared with Embassy Canberra.
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